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2007 WINNER

Christine O. Gregoire: Negotiator-in-Chief

by JONATHAN WALTERS | photograph by BARBARA KINNEY

To say that Christine Gregoire's start as governor of Washington was inauspicious would be an understatement. After an apparent 130-vote win in November 2004, the election was marred by multiple recounts and a lawsuit. When the Democratic majority in the legislature moved to certify her election, Republicans mustered on the front lawn of the statehouse chanting, "Revote! Revote!"

Opinion polls early on ranked her as one of the three least popular governors in the nation. Yet she hung tough during the recounts, the lawsuit, the shouts of protest and the bad poll numbers. "I said whether I'm governor for four months or four years, we're going to get going here," says Gregoire. And that's just what she did.

With each passing year, Gregoire's approval rating has increased, and her standing as a deft and inclusive deal-maker has grown more solid. The list of her accomplishments would be the envy of any governor, ranging from budget surpluses to ambitious education and economic development initiatives to the resolution of some of the state's longest running legislative battles.

Even Republicans are saying nice things about her these days. "I've been in leadership roles under other governors," says House Minority Leader Richard DeBolt, "and they were very formal and process-oriented. She'll come in and talk to you one on one."

Her "negotiator-in-chief" approach to governance has been the hallmark of Gregoire's term. But the fact that she can get warring factions to sit down and talk shouldn't have come as any surprise. When Gregoire ran the state's ecology department, she hammered out an agreement in 1989 with the federal government on cleaning up the infamous mess at the Hanford nuclear facility. And as state attorney general for three terms, she was one of the lead plaintiffs and negotiators on the national \$208 billion tobacco settlement.

As governor, she has brought together doctors and trial lawyers to work out a long-stalled medical malpractice reform bill. She cajoled conservative members of her own party to support a civil-union law. And in a state where water is the third rail of politics, she ended a 30-year stalemate on a long-range plan for managing the Columbia River.

It was clear as early as the 2005 legislative session that Gregoire shouldn't be underestimated. At the height of her unpopularity, she stepped up to champion a nearly 10-cent-a-gallon increase in the state's gas tax to fund critical infrastructure needs. She mustered the two-thirds majorities necessary in the legislature, and then watched a ballot initiative to repeal the tax fail spectacularly.

Her secret? "She's really smart," says Bob Watt, vice president of government and community relations for Boeing. "And, yes, she comes to issues with opinions — like all of us. But she is capable of listening to and considering opinions different from her own."

She also runs one of the most open state governments in the country. Her Government Measurement, Accountability and Performance (GMAP) initiative includes regular meetings featuring frank discussion among top state staff about various agencies' performance. The meetings are open to the public and the press.

In person, the 60-year-old Gregoire (who began her career in state government as a clerk-typist and welfare-fraud investigator) is warm and open. But she doesn't bring up such details as that she's a breast cancer survivor or that her husband is a Vietnam veteran. Clearly, she is devoted to her two daughters, one of whom, she laughs, "picked out my inaugural gown for me" because the governor-elect was too busy fighting to stay afloat in the churning wake of the 2004 election.

Since Republicans had the most to say at the beginning of her tenure, there's no reason not to give them the last word now. "We're not always ideologically aligned," says DeBolt. "But I think she's a good manager and that she's doing a good job of running the state."



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